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AUTHOR Crowley, Carolyn L.; Lavery, Barbara; Siegel, Alexander W.; Cousins, Jennifer H.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the specific nature of the relationship between involvement in various risk-taking behaviors and levels of gang involvement. Forty-nine high school students, 24 girls and 25 boys, ages 14 to 18, from a rural Texas community, completed a gang involvement questionnaire and the Risk Inventory and Perception Scale during individual interviews. They were rated as high, medium, and low for gang involvement. Four patterns of involvement in risk-taking behaviors were identified based on levels of gang involvement: (1) students who were both moderate and high for gang involvement reported more involvement in risk-taking behavior than those who were low for gang involvement; (2) moderately gang involved adolescents reported significantly different levels of involvement in risk-taking behaviors than adolescents who were either uninvolved or highly involved; (3) highly gang involved adolescents reported more involvement than both uninvolved and moderately involved adolescents; and (4) there were no differences between levels of gang involvement for some risk-taking behaviors (e.g. breaking curfew). These results suggest that the identification of gang involved adolescents and the development of intervention programs would benefit from a more complete understanding of the behavioral concomitants of gang involvement. (Contains 4 figures, 2 tables, and 12 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Moving Beyond Labels: Approaching Gang Involvement Through Behavior

Carolyn L. Crowley, Ph.D.
Baylor College of Medicine

Barbara Lavery, Ph.D.
Youth and Family Services,
Brazoria County, TX

Alexander W. Siegel, Ph.D.
University of Houston

Jennifer H. Cousins, Ph.D.
Baylor College of Medicine

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Jennifer H. Cousins

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Abstract

Despite differing levels of gang participation and involvement in risky gang behaviors, gang involvement is often overgeneralized as gang membership. This study examined the specific nature of the relationship between involvement in various risk-taking behaviors and levels of gang involvement.

Forty-nine high school students completed a gang involvement questionnaire and the Risk Inventory and Perception Scale (RIPS) during individual interviews. They were rated as high, medium and low for gang involvement.

Four patterns of involvement in risk-taking behaviors were identified based on levels of gang involvement: (1) students who were both moderate and high for gang involvement reported more involvement in risk-taking behavior than those who were low for gang involvement, (2) moderately gang involved adolescents reported significantly different levels of involvement in risk-taking behaviors than adolescents who were either uninvolved or highly involved, and (3) highly gang involved adolescents reported more involvement than both uninvolved and moderately involved adolescents, (4) there were no differences between levels of gang involvement for some risk-taking behaviors (e.g., breaking curfew).

These results suggest that the identification of gang involved adolescents and the development of intervention programs would benefit from a more complete understanding of the behavioral concomitants of gang involvement

Introduction

Law enforcement agencies recently estimated that 4,881 adolescent gangs currently exist in the U.S. (Howell, 1994). Although gang members may be involved in drug use and violent behavior (Lyon, Henggeler, & Hall, 1992; Adler, Ovando, & Hocevar, 1984; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991), their level of involvement in general risk-taking behaviors is unclear.

Previous risk-taking research has focused on the extent to which adolescents take risks, what risks they take, and why they take them (Lavery, Siegel, Cousins, & Rubovits, 1993; Arnett, 1991;

Jessor, 1991; Ianotti & Bush, 1992). While gang involvement may be considered a general type of risk-taking, the specific behaviors that identify adolescents as gang members may also be considered risky.

Past research has examined the role of peers in adolescent risk-taking behaviors (Kafka & London, 1991; Ianotti & Bush, 1992; Brown, Clasen, & Eicher, 1986; Chassin, 1985), as well as the relationship between drug use and gang membership (Adler, Ovando & Hocevar, 1984; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Lyon, Henggeler & Hall, 1992). However, few researchers have utilized a thorough range of risk-taking behaviors in their investigations of the relationship between risk-taking and gang involvement.

The purpose of this study was to explore patterns of risk-taking behaviors associated with varying degrees of gang involvement.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 24 girls and 25 boys ages 14 to 18, who were recruited from a school drop-out prevention program. In order to be in the program they had to be identified as "at risk" for dropping out by parents, teachers, counselors, or school officials. All participants were enrolled in a technical high school in a rural Texas community.

Materials

- Risk Involvement and Perception Scale (RIPS)
- Setting questionnaire
- Demographics questionnaire
- Gang involvement questionnaire

Procedure

Adolescents completed the questionnaires during individual interviews. They were asked to rate their involvement in 20 behaviors from the RIPS. Adolescents completed the gang involvement questionnaire last.

Results

Gang involvement was determined by responses to subset of items from the gang involvement questionnaire (see Table 1).

Risk-taking was determined by responses to the items from the RIPS (see Table 2). Mean levels of risk-taking involvement were examined in relation to levels of gang involvement. Four patterns of involvement in risk-taking behaviors were identified based on levels of gang involvement. In the first pattern, students who were rated as low for gang involvement reported lower levels of having sex without a condom (M = .36) than students who were moderate or high (M = 2.0) for gang involvement ($t[1,46.7]$) = 3.98, $p<.001$). In the second pattern, low and high gang-involvement students reported getting drunk (M = 3.8) and driving while intoxicated (M =1.0) more often than moderately gang involved students (M = 2.0, $t[1,47]$ = 2.2, $p<.05$), and M = .10, $t[1,41.5]$ = -2.7, $p<.01$, respectively). In the third pattern, low and high gang-involved students reported less "shoplifting" (M = 1.2) than moderate gang-involved students (M = 2.7, $t[1,47]$ = 2.2, $p<.05$). In the fourth pattern, low and moderate gang-involved students reported smoking marijuana, carrying a weapon, vandalism, and taking cocaine less frequently (M = 2.3, M = .60, M = 1.1, and M = .20, respectively) than highly gang-involved students (M = 4.7, $t[1, 47]$ = 3.133, $p<.01$, M = 3.7, $t[1,38.6]$ = 4.84, $p<.001$. M = 4.3, $t[1, 38]$ = 5.3, $p<.001$, and M = 1.6, $t[1, 28.2]$ = 3.39, $p<.01$, respectively). There were no differences between levels of gang involvement for involvement in: breaking curfew, smoking cigarettes, driving 15 miles per hour over the speed limit, drag racing, having sex, cheating on an exam, and skipping school.

Discussion

Adolescents who were involved in gangs (either moderately or highly) were more likely to have reported having sex without a condom. Adolescents with any exposure to gangs may view the risks of having sex without a condom as minimal relative to their involvement in other risky gang behaviors.

Getting drunk and driving while intoxicated are behaviors that are likely to limit an adolescent's ability to think and protect him or herself in hazardous situations. The adolescent who is beginning to be involved in a gang or is not already a core member of a gang, may need to be more alert when socializing. They may be less comfortable drinking within the social context of the gang. In contrast, shoplifting may represent an early initiating behavior. Adolescents who are highly gang involved, or more "core" members, may be involved in more serious criminal behaviors and/or may not need to "prove" themselves to other gang members.

The hardcore gang behaviors are those behaviors typically associated with gang involvement in both research and popular conceptions of gang membership. They could be generally classified under the categories of drug use, vandalism and violence.

Surprisingly, three behaviors are not related to level of gang involvement: smoking, breaking curfew, driving 15 miles over the speed limit. Understanding risk-taking behaviors that are not related to gang involvement is just as important as identifying strong relationships between risk-taking behaviors and gang involvement. For example, many cities have adopted curfews in an effort to "deal with" gang problems. While it may effect involvement in criminal activity, curfews do not seem to be broken by more gang involved adolescents. In other words we can not target adolescents based on their breaking curfew, speeding, or smoking. These risk-taking behaviors might be defined as more "typical" adolescent behaviors.

These results indicate that patterns of adolescent risk-taking behaviors may help to: a) identify adolescents' gang involvement, and b) provide opportunities and avenues for intervention. While breaking curfew or skipping school are often chosen as points of intervention for law enforcement and

school officials, this study suggests that these behaviors may not be appropriate targets for dealing with gang involvement. Law enforcement and school policies should be based on a more complete understanding of the ways in which discrete behaviors serve to identify and promote or retard gang involvement.

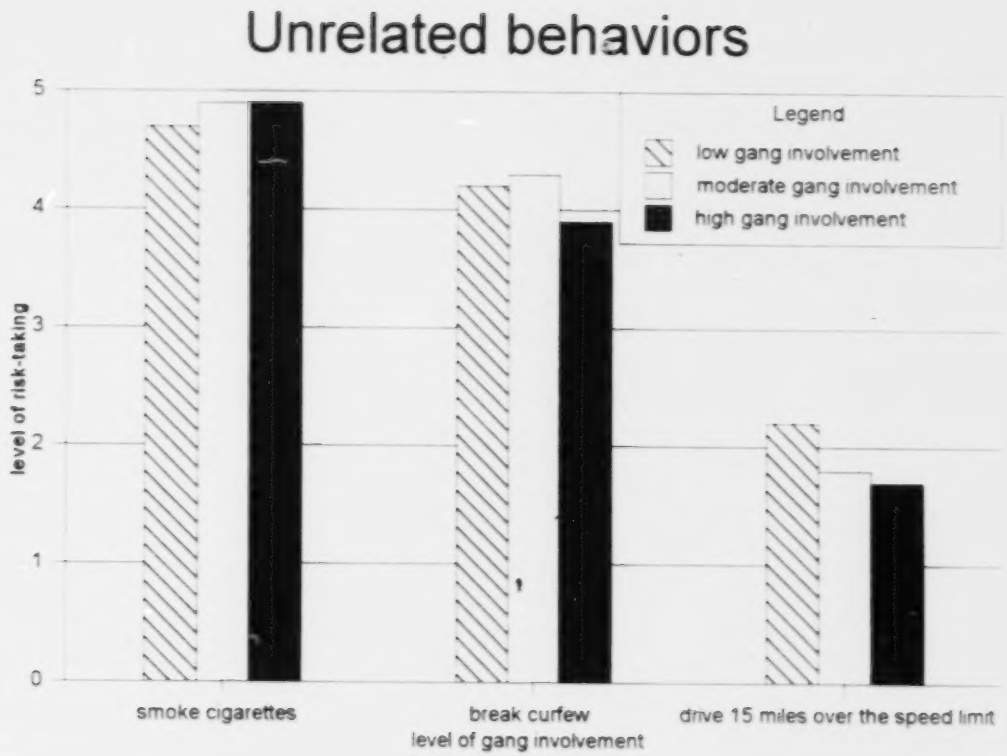
Table 1.
Questions used to assign gang involvement level

Question #	Question
1	Do you belong to a gang?
4	Have you been cliqued in / jumped in ?
7	Have you participated in someone else's cliquing in / jumping in?
8	Have you been involved in a gang for more than 2 years?
9	Have you been to *metropolitan city* with other gang members?
11	How many of those fights* were you involved in ? *this refers to previous question: Within the last month, how many gang fights did you know about?
13	Do you get to make or help make decisions about other gang members?
14	Do you think you will be in a gang 2 years from now?

Table 2.
Risk Inventory and Perceptions Scale (RIPS)

For each of the following, circle the number that corresponds to your involvement in that behavior

Never	Tried it once	2-3 times in my life	A few times per year	Once a month	2-3 times a month	Once a week	2 - 3 times a week	Daily or More
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8



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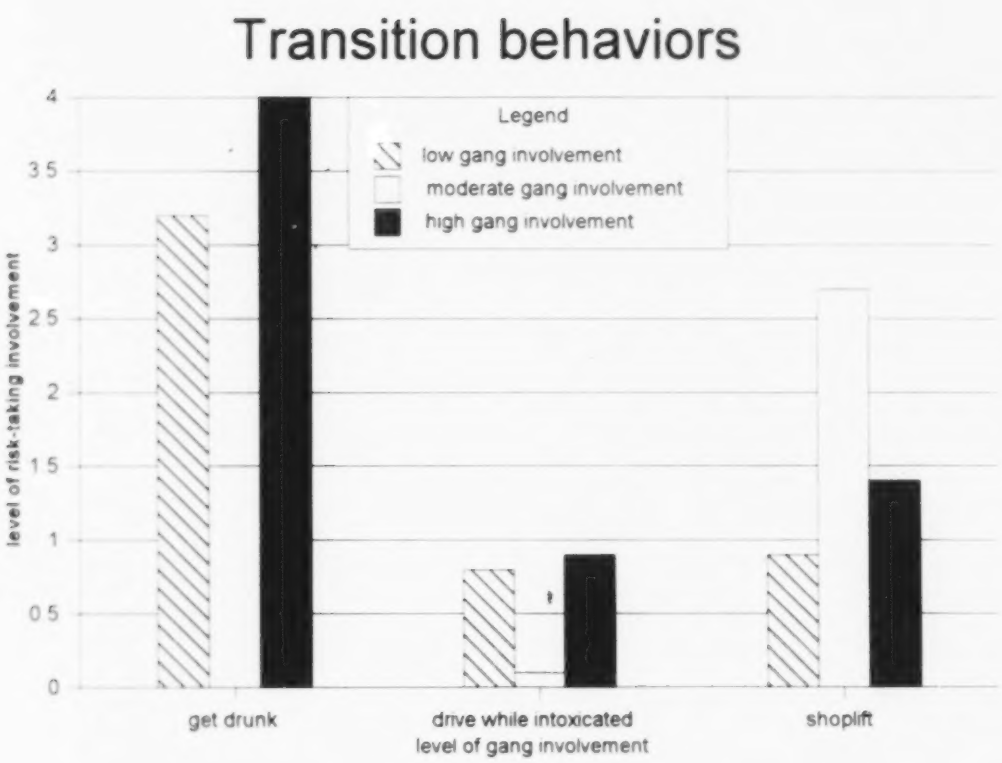

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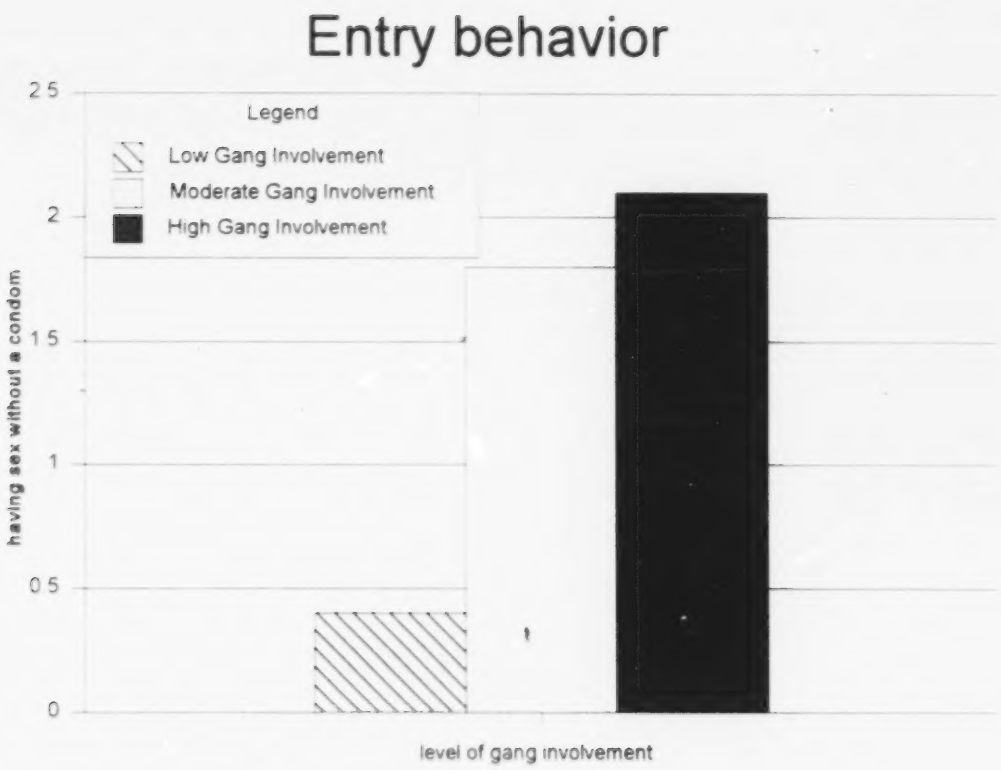

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